VISUALISING THE CITY

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ABSTRACT

In 2017 the fifth iteration of the International Visual Methods Conference was held at the Singapore Institute of Technology.

The theme, "Visualising the City", brought together more than 110 participants from 26 different countries, with a combination of paper presentations, art exhibitions and walking workshops. Deliberately interdisciplinary, the conference theme sought submissions from the arts, humanities, social sciences and hard sciences.

This special issue of Visual Ethnography follows on from the conference theme, in which the contributions, again drawn from a diverse set of disciplines, approaches and theories, considers how (and why) we visualise global urban environments, and what are the implications for such methods. In this introduction we reflect on the conference's theme, keynotes and papers, and how these have led to the formation of the issue. We seek to contextualise the issue's articles and photo-essays within theories of visual methods in the social science and the city, and propose that visual methods in ethnographic traditions have particular strengths in revealing urban place-making through everyday praxis, subtle resistance and deliberate narratives.

BIO

Terence Heng is a lecturer in Sociology at the University of Liverpool, where he is also an associate with the Centre for Architecture and the Visual Arts. He is the author of Visual Methods in the Field: Photography for the Social Sciences (Routledge 2016), and his work has been featured in Area, The Sociological Review, Geographical Review and Cultural Geographies. His research interests cover the intersection of Sociology, Cultural Geography and Creative Practice, and include sacred space, photography as a research method and the materiality of deathscapes. He is the winner of the inaugural International Visual Sociology Association's Prosser Award for Outstanding Visual Methodologies, and the 2015 Sociological Review Prize for Outstanding Scholarship.

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Introduction

In Georg Simmel's famous treatise of the city, he describes the making of the blasé urbanised individual as a result of "(an) over-growth of objective culture (becoming)… less and less satisfactory for the individual. Perhaps less conscious than in practical activity and in the obscure complex of feelings which flow from him, he is reduced to a negligible quantity. He becomes a single cog…" (Simmel 1903:8). The blasé individual is overwhelmed and anonymised – he or she becoming numb to the over-stimuli of a hyper-modernised life that simultaneously inspires and demotivates. But we know that the city does so much more than this. It allows for great creativity but at the same time takes away identity. This dialectical tension of opportunity and obstruction in the city was the basis for the 'conference photograph' of the fifth International Visual Methods Conference (IVMC). The image was a wide-open landscape photograph of a single maintenance engineer wearing an orange safety helmet, dwarfed by the immense architecture of Singapore's Central Business District – in particular, the roof of Singapore's Esplanade Theatre, a multi-million dollar initiative to project Singapore as a regional performing arts venue. Flanking the roof were archetypal glass-fronted skyscrapers so common to our time, testaments to Singapore's relentless pursuit for economic growth and its identity as a global city (Sassen-Koob 1990).

Cities are vast, sometimes autonomous, sometimes oppressive. To visualise the city is to visualise many things – its architecture and spaces (Jones 2011, Kwok and Coppoolse 2018), its inhabitants (Harper 2006, Ye 2013) and its practices (Orr 2012) to name but a few. The choice of IVMC's theme, Visualising the City, was borne out of not just the conference's location – Singapore – but also as a unifying focus for the myriad number of disciplines we had hoped to attract. Initially conceived within social science disciplines, IVMC was first held in 2009 at the Open University in the United Kingdom, before travelling to other venues in the UK (2011, 2015), as well as New Zealand (2013) and Singapore (2017). In 2019, it will held in Eastern Europe for the first time in Bucharest, Romania. The conference now attracts participants not just from the social sciences, but also the arts, humanities and creative disciplines.

Our keynote speakers reflected this diversity of interests. Caroline Knowles, a sociologist; Alan Oei, a curator and Richard Koeck, an architect and film-maker, delivered a series of thought-provoking lectures aimed not just as a catalyst for discussion during the conference, but also as a response to topics and issues raised by delegates in their own presentations. Knowles, currently Professor of Sociology and the British Academy's Programme Director for its Cities and Infrastructure Programme, and also known for her work on the social life of flip-flops (Knowles 2014), as well as migrants in Hong Kong (Knowles and Harper 2009), brought delegates on a visual journey of London's ultra-rich quarters, narrating the sociology of walking, photographing and seeing. Oei, who is the Director of the Substation, Singapore's oldest arts venue, hosted the second keynote at the Substation itself, discussing the role of the arts and

arts intervention in Singapore, and the historic role of the Substation and its location in the centre of the city as a place to visualise and engage with state and society. Koeck, Professor of Architecture and the Visual Arts and Director of the Centre for Architecture and the Visual Arts at the University of Liverpool, recounted the affordances of new technologies and film in the visualisation of historic elements of the city, creating new and exciting interpretations of amalgamated architecture and human traces (see also Penz and Koeck 2017).

Conference presentations and workshops were equally diverse and enriching. Based around six different sub-themes of mapping, activism, teaching, criticality, urbanism and walking – participants demonstrated, used and critiqued visual methods from a stunning array of perspectives. A key highlight was the moving of the conference beyond the physical bounds of the university campus into the city, not just through Oei's keynote at the Substation, but also through a number of walks and workshops facilitated by the delegates themselves. Going forward, we have found these workshops to resonate deeply with participants, who were able to see visual methods as live methods (Back and Puwar 2012).

In developing the theme for this special issue, we chose to retain the title *Visualising the City* to provide continuity to the highly participatory and immersive elements of the conference. The papers and photo-essays in this issue thus reflect the ethos of participation, observation and visualisation – elements within the methodological scope of visual ethnography. The practice of visual ethnography has been well documented (Banks 2001, 2013, Pink 2007, 2012), and it is not in the purview of this introduction to repeat what has already been very well-argued in this journal dedicated to the method. Indeed, the act of doing visual ethnography or visually-focused participant observation (Heng 2016) has found its way beyond anthropology, being embraced by a much wider range of disciplines such as Geography (Hunt 2016) and Sociology (Heng 2015, Grant et al 2018, Pauwels 2009). The contributions in this issue span disciplines and approaches, but through them, we see a number of propositions emerge.

Revealing Praxis of Place-Making in the City

The first proposition is the ability of visual ethnographic methods and (mobile) technologies to capture the praxis (Heng 2018) of place-making at home. Charishma Ratnam's paper on using visual and mobile methods to document and reveal the home-making practices of Sri Lankan refugees in Australia does just that. While "home" is a common theme in the study of urban spaces (Koch and Latham 2013, Shanaathanan 2015), fewer have tried to incorporate visualising and walking within the home as a method. Here, Ratnam both videos and interviews her collaborators as they walk through their homes (and then "re-walk" while watching captured video) in Sydney, and also considers the use and creation of photographic portraits of home spaces. Ratnam's aim of documenting how a sense of home is created by migrants through both material and symbolic practices like prayer, sacredness, identity and memory shows forth in images of shrines mixed in with everyday domestic spaces. While not shown in the article itself, the importance of the moving image in Ratnam's approach and insights is highly evident – kinetic movements of the body, as participants move through their homes, sometimes to emphasize points made during interviews are captured and coded, revealing Ratnam's point of the necessity of visual ethnographic methods in the methodological process of understanding home.

Place-making activities are also central to Brian Kwok's paper on the tactics of Hawkers in Hong Kong, but this time in public, liminal streets. The city is often a regulated space (eg Kong 1993) – one which is managed by state and/or private interests. Undermining, or at least challenging these regulations would be subversive attempts by actors whose interests do not always tally with the dominant narrative (see Watt and Minton 2016). Kwok examines a particular place in Hong Kong – Fa Yuen Street, as a case study into the variety of ways Hawkers resist regulation from the state. Kwok makes use of a combination of coding, sketching and photography to reveal spatial arrangements and arranging, and subtle acts of subversiveness that enables Hawkers to appropriate without being seen as aggressive. Of note is the combination of two genres of the visual – illustration and photograph – of the same subject (a hawker stall). This approach reveals to us ethnographic details not just through image, but imagery as well. The stall produce and layout vividly recreated through another way of seeing (Berger 2008).

The proposition of 'subversive tactics' continues on in Terence Heng's visual essay, aptly entitled "Precarious Spaces: Visualising Unofficial Sacred Spaces", Heng examines the continued tension between the desire of the Singapore state to control which spaces are sacred and which are profane (Kong 1993, Woods 2018). Official sacred spaces in Singapore, those approved by the state for use in

religious and/or spiritual activities, are often rare and expensive, requiring religious organisations to have large financial resources in order to bid for and compete in auction-style purchases. Unofficial sacred space, encompassing informal (Woods 2013), transient and ad-hoc sacred spaces emerge from such regulation, where individuals and smaller organisations find ways and means to appropriate space for their faith. In this visual essay, Heng uses visual ethnographic methods (in this case documentary photography) to uncover the various ways in which Chinese religion practitioners, particularly spirit mediums, engage in the use of both aesthetic markers (Knowles 2003) and performative praxis (Heng 2015) as a way to negotiate the tensions between regulation and (spiritual) reward.

It is not just individuals who engage in place-making throughout the city. Ross McGarry's visual essay looks at how large organisations engage in altering and appropriating spaces to develop narratives of not both the space and of themselves. McGarry's visual autoethnography of the temporary militarisation of the city – evidenced through the British Armed Forces's use of the city of Liverpool's historic waterfront docks during Armed Forces Day– examines the various identities performed by the Armed Forces in their parades and exhibition stands. The display of weapons and equipment, marching of soldiers/veterans and 'non-public' areas all contribute as aesthetic makers associated with military identities. The images created in this visual autoethnography are in turn realist and symbolic (Knowles and Sweetman 2004), reflecting both the literal militarisation of a quotidian civilian space (thereby normalizing the military (see Basham 2013)) as well as the metaphorical public-private, performed-hidden dialectics at play in military identities.

Innovation in Visual Methods and Visual Ethnography

Another proposition that emerges from the Ratnam's and Kwok's papers is the importance and significance in innovating for visual methods in visual ethnographic practices. Whether that is through the use of new technology or a re-imagination/re-combination of techniques, finding new and previously underused ways of seeing and/or visualising is crucial to our engagement with the visual. To this extent, the final two papers in this special issue are focused on the novel approaches they have undertaken to engage with the city. Loh Chin Ee's paper on juxtaposition (Heng 2016) proposes innovation in both the application of the concept (through compositional discovery – that is, to compare and contrast elements in an image, whether intentional or not) as well as the tools used to create such images (amongst others, time-lapse photography – see also Simpson 2012). Loh's study draws from a much larger ethnographic dataset of reading practices and library design in secondary schools in Singapore, as Loh and her team work to understand best practices for policies and strategies meant to encourage greater and deeper literacy amongst students aged 13 to 17. In particular, collaborating with school and school libraries has allowed Loh and her team to establish different ways of creating images, from more traditional documentary photography techniques to GoPro cameras that allow for different methodological approaches that still embrace the spirit of observation in an ethnographic vein (Dewalt and Dewalt 2011).

In calling for papers, we chose to leave the widest possible interpretation for authors to engage with "the city", whether it was the more public and performative spaces of Liverpool's tourist attractions, well-trodden streets of Hong Kong, or semi-hidden living rooms and factory spaces in Singapore, each paper and visual essay sought to make full use of the visual in their ethnographic explorations. Like other special issues, we also sought a balanced mixing of disciplines and approaches, looking also for inter-disciplinary innovations that better our understanding of the spaces in which we spend much of our quotidian life (Lefebrve 1996). The city, then, does not always make us blasé, but is a source and subject of great curiosity and engagement.

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